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ABSTRACT

Confluent education holds that any learning involves the affective as well as the cognitive domain. Affective components are present in the student, in the subject matter, and in the relationship between the two. Affect and cognition can be brought into meaningful relationship or "confluence" in classroom lessons which teach reading and writing. Processes which may be used to accomplish this goal include group dynamics and Gestalt awareness exercises. The tools to be used in achieving confluence are reading and writing, the materials are standard curriculum materials, and the interests and concerns are those of students. These methods were used in a reading/writing fundamentals curriculum for a group of low-achieving students during a six-week summer session at a community college. A control group was given a curriculum which was identical except that the affective component was not intentionally structured. Pretests and posttests were administered to both groups. In comparison with the control group, the treatment group showed improvements in reading comprehension, work methods, and teacher approval, as well as significant improvements in self-concept. It is concluded, therefore, that it is possible to develop both learning skills and human potential within the same curriculum. (LL)

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A CONFLUENT READING/ENGLISH FUNDAMENTALS CURRICULUM

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David N. McCarthy

Every good teacher knows that the learning which takes place in his (her) classroom is a function of aptitude and attitude. What the student learns is determined in part by what he thinks, and in part by how he feels about the subject, the learning process going on, and himself. There is sufficient evidence, both informal and empirical, to corroborate this position. (2, 6, 7, 10) Attitudes significantly affect the acquisition of measurable skills. They are important even if we define learning as a "change in behavior." And if our definition of learning is extended to embrace also the idea that learning is a "change in perception," then the student's attitudes become the very stuff of the learning process.

Attitudes, feelings, values--these evanescent entities, difficult to define ontologically, and even more difficult to measure empirically--are generally categorized under the rubric of "affect." For the purpose of this discussion, it is convenient to consider the learning process as an integration of two processes: affective and cognitive. Affect is concerned with the emotions, the passions, the dispositions, motives, moral and aesthetic sensibilities, sympathy, capacity for con-

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cern, and appreciation. (14:23) The cognitive process in concerned with factual knowledge and formal relationships. It is discipline in the ways of knowing, involving induction, deduction analysis, and generalization. (14:23)

Most language arts fundamentals courses will deal specifically with these cognitive relationships in the form of reading, writing, and study skills. Yet the student's values, concerns, and feelings are always present. Sometimes they assist in the learning process; frequently they impede it; rarely are they an intentionally structured component of a curriculum; almost never are they seen as objectives in themselves.

Confluent education holds that any learning involves the affective as well as the cognitive domain. Affective components are present in the student, in the subject matter, and in the relationship between the two. It is the purpose of this discussion to indicate how affect and cognition can be brought into meaningful relationship, or "confluence," in the classroom lessons which teach reading and writing. The processes used are group dynamics and Gestalt awareness exercises. The tools are reading and writing; the materials, standard curriculum materials, and the interests and concerns almost universally identifiable in students. The result is an improvement in study habits, teacher acceptance, and self-concept.

The first postulate for a Confluent Reading/Writing Program using an approach promulgated by Weinstein and Fantini (4) and Newburg and Borton (3) holds that, just as a student can learn about reading, writing, or math, subjects which are "outside," so can he become aware

of and learn to deal rationally with his own concerns and interests, subjects which are "inside." These concerns are generally defined as lying within the parameters of identity, connectedness, and power.

Identity concerns are defined as those dealing with a person's sense of worth, self-image, and self-esteem. They deal with "Who am I?" and "What am I worth?" (5:4) Connectedness concerns involve aspects of behavior dealing with a sense of positive affiliation with others. They raise the questions "To whom do I belong?" "Who are the significant others?" (5:5) Power issues are those aspects of behavior aimed at providing the person with a sense of influence over what is going on in his life. (5:5)

The second theorem for a Confluent Language Arts Program derives from Gestalt therapy. Fritz Perls defines Gestalt psychology as "field theory" psychology. According to this theory, the perception of a thing takes place not by itself, but within a "field" which contains its opposite. The perception of day is realizable only by the existence of night; the emergence of a clock on the wall is possible only by an awareness of the wall, or what is "non-clock." The part can be defined only in relationship to the whole. (9)

As Wallen points out, Perls applied this theory of perception to organic perceptions and feelings. (13) Living is seen as a continual process of completing Gestalten. The example Perls gives is that of a person reading a book. The book is the figure, the reader's body is the background. As he reads, he becomes aware that he is thirsty. The sensation of thirst in his throat now emerges as figural, and the book becomes part of the background. Perhaps our reader now imagines

a glass of water. He gets up, satisfies his thirst, and returns to his reading. His actions have been determined by his need, the need of his organism to be in a state of balance, a state of wholeness. Thus needs organize both perception and behavior.

In the current discussion, Gestalt awareness is the vehicle through which the student becomes aware of not what, but also how he goes about knowing. Hence, the learning process, which includes learning how to read and write, is seen as, not just an end in itself, but a vehicle for self-knowledge.

The third postulate for a Confluent Language Arts Curriculum is group dynamics. "Group dynamics" is the term for that aspect of human relations which deals with the interaction among members of a group. Traditionally, a "group" is defined as a collection of individuals. In a typical group dynamics situation, intra-personal growth, or growth within the individual, is facilitated through feedback from other members of the group. This feedback includes the perceptions and intuitions of these individuals.

A second way in which group dynamics leads to intra-personal growth involves the integrating of subselves. Shapiro (11) and Assigioli (1) also conceive of the group as a set of separate selves or subpersonalities within the individual. One's subpersonalities may be, but usually are not, in total accord with one another. By identifying and rationally dealing with such subselves, the individual can become more "integrated" or, in Gestalt terms, more "whole." Here the term "group dynamics" comes to mean the interaction among separate subselves within the same individual.

These three theorems can now be brought together in the form of two Confluent reading and writing lessons.

LESSON 1: Reading

Students are divided into groups of four. Each is given the following list of "conversation starters":

Directions: Whenever you feel ready, any member of the group can read any statement he feels like reading. Don't feel you have to stick to these. Use them as a basis or springboard for discussion. Be spontaneous. Be funny. Be honest.

On vacations, I like to...
If I had an extra $50 I would...
If I ran the schools I would...
One thing I like most about school is...
When I'm alone I usually...
The worst teacher I ever had...
I get angry when...
The best teacher I ever had...
When I enter a new group in school I feel...
I'm most happy in school when...
In school, I do worst when...
Tests are...
I trust teachers who...

Finally, as a group, list five things you would do if you had complete charge of running a school.

Reading assignment: Read the essay in your text that gives one man's opinion concerning education.

LESSON 2: Writing

Pick an object in the room that interests you. Imagine yourself as that object. Now, write the words, phrases, or ideas which describe how you appear on the "outside": color, size, shape, function. When you have finished, write the words and phrases which describe how you feel on the "inside": what you like, what you do, what you don't like.

Break into groups of four. Share your perceptions and ideans. Stay in the present tense in describing yourself: "I am the..."

"I like..."

Continuing in your groups, address yourself to the question "How many of the qualities attributed to the object can I 'own' as my own?"

Writing assignment: Take the ideas and words generated in your discussion and description and organize them into an outline. Turn this outline into an essay.

The first lesson deals with reading skills. It also develops personal growth. This is accomplished through both content and process. The content of the reading lesson is organized to allow the student to make a personally relevant connection between himself and the material to be read. In so doing, it deals with, not merely what the author says, but how that is relevant to the self. Hence, it catalyzes an interaction between the author's concerns with education and the student's concerns with his own education, as these are related to identity and power. A convenient way of looking at the relationship is provided by Harmon and Simon (12): 1) Values clarification--To what extent am I concerned with my success in school? How do I deal with frustrations to this success? 2) Conceptual--This is a concern for identity and power which others experience. 3) Factual--The author of the article thinks grades, tests, and incompetent teachers should be abolished. It is noted here that we are working from the student's concerns to the curriculum material. In moving from values clarification and the student's internal referencing system, we are using the essay as a source of information for, and feedback about the self. At the same time, the very process involved in the interpersonal dynamics of the group use of conversation starters deals with

the concern of connectedness.

The second exercise deals with writing skills. It also deals with personal growth. By imagining himself as an object in the room, the student is projecting a part of his personality into that object. For Perls (9:128-133), a projection is a part of one's self. Projections create "holes" in the personality. The part of himself which the student projects in this exercise may not be a part which he generally disowns. Nevertheless, the basic process that deals with "re-owning" the projection is available for personal growth. This is the process of integrating attention with awareness. In this exercise, it consists first of owning (role-playing) the projections, and then abstracting or cognizing the experience. This second step is accomplished through discussion and writing. In terms of the group dynamics discussion given earlier, these projections are of the same nature as subpersonalities. By dealing with them rationally the student becomes more "whole," more "integrated," more "aware" of himself.

In these two lessons, it is seen that the traditional reading and writing components of a language arts curriculum can become vehicles for self-knowledge and personal growth. By dealing with the concerns for identity, connectedness, and power, and by applying the process of Gestalt and Group Dynamics, classroom lessons can develop, not only cognitive skills, but the student's human potential.

The three theorems of the Confluent Language Arts Curriculum have been empirically tested. The lessons here, and similar lessons were used in a Reading/Writing Fundamentals Curriculum given to a group of low-achieving students during a six-week Summer Session at a community

college. A control group was given a curriculum identical in every respect, except that the affective component was not intentionally structured. Pre- and post-tests were given to both groups. In comparison with the control group, the treatment group showed improvements in reading comprehension, work methods, and teacher approval. It showed significant improvements in self-concept. (8) Thus, it is possible to develop both learning skills and human potential within the same curriculum.

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